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AUTHOR Mansfield, Barbara
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a study which examined the similarities and differences in the reactions to a naturalistic account between an internal participant audience and an audience external to the evaluation context so that some notions about generalizability of such material could be developed. A second aim of the study was to examine the effectiveness of a naturalistic account in promoting educators to reflect upon their own practice. The research in this investigation involved: (1) a six month case of cooperative education in an urban secondary school, and (2) the collection and interpretation of data about audience reaction to an account which was based upon information gathered during the case study. The results indicate that the account stimulated quite different responses in the two audiences. The internal group did examine current practice and frequently worked out potential alternate strategies for overcoming their problem areas in the future. Conversely, the account seems to have stimulated the external audience to look back upon their past experiences and the manner in which they had solved their problem. The paper also discusses some pedagogical implications which the results of this study may have for evaluators. (Author)

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Audience Reaction to Educational Accounts

Barbara Mansfield

The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

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Audience Reaction to Educational Accounts

During the past several years the literature on evaluation has abounded with utilization studies on how audience members employ the information which is presented to them in a variety of forms. While much work has been conducted on these external results of evaluation, little emphasis has been placed on how the information in evaluation reports affects educational practitioners' understandings and perceptions of their own practice and purpose. Perhaps this process might be thought of as an internal outcome of evaluation as it involves reflection rather than action (although it may often lead to action at a later date).

The concept of reflection is a complex one which involves several elements. It first entails a "stepping back" from what one sees as being the accepted reality of a situation. Practitioners might then think about why they do something from a pedagogical or personal perspective; what the possible alternatives might be; and what possible consequences might result from these alternatives.

But how does one craft an account which encourages practitioners to view their practice from a new perspective? Stake (1978) suggests that the depiction of specific, concrete events should aid readers to vicariously experience situations which might be somewhat novel to their own backgrounds. It is through these particulars that concepts and generalizations are formed which can then be applied to new situations (Eisner, 1979). Donmoyer (1981), in his work on psychological generalization, goes further by presenting a theoretical foundation for this process.

He suggests that if readers are given the chance to undergo vicariously the experiences which lead another person to an under-

standing which varies from their own, they are more likely to assimilate and accommodate new information. This process permits them to move away from their original understanding of a practice by giving them new experiences which are incorporated with past ones. Hence, a new cognitive structure may be constructed through which the readers can view their original actions from a different perspective.

As the reader is freed from his/her original viewpoint about a practice or purpose, he/she may begin to doubt whether it was the most effective action. According to Dewey (1933), this doubting phase is the initial step of reflective thinking. The possibility then exists that the reader will examine alternative courses of action to overcome the doubt raised. Thus psychological generalization may be the process by which reflection can be stimulated by experiential accounts.

The Research

The study which I will be discussing today grew out of the need for evaluators to gain more knowledge of how audiences react to accounts. This information may help us to understand ways in which we can construct accounts which help readers to better understand the basis for their own and others' actions in specific circumstances.

The study had two major purposes. The first was to compare the reactions to an educational account by an internal audience whose members had participated in an evaluation with those of an audience external to the evaluation context. This was done so that some notions about the generalizability of such material could be developed. The second purpose was to examine the effectiveness of a naturalistic

account in promoting educators to reflect upon their practice and purpose. To do this, both groups were invited to read a 40 page account based on a six month case study of a co-operative education program and to participate in follow-up discussion sessions.

The two audiences participating in the study were composed of staff members who had some involvement in co-operative education (co-op). The internal group members were drawn from a secondary vocational school which encouraged grade 11 and 12 students to take part in co-op activities connected with their specialty shop subjects. The external audience was made up of staff members from a collegiate and vocational school in which the co-op activities were spread across a much wider segment of the curriculum.

Collecting the Data

During the case study portion of my work, I spent three days a week in the first school mentioned above as an observer within the academic and shop classrooms or on the co-op job sites. During this time I also conducted open-ended interviews with teachers, students, administrators, parents and employers in an attempt to develop a greater understanding of what the co-op experience meant to them. Documents about co-op at both the school and county level were examined as another source of administrative and historical data.

Crafting the Account

Evaluators have many different objectives in mind when they conduct their evaluation activities and provide feedback for their audiences. Joel has suggested that there is an educational element

underlying these activities. In my own work, I consciously attempted to use the framework discussed by Joel to direct my actions as an evaluator. In writing the account about co-op education, my own educational objective was to promote some reflection on the part of its readers.

The evaluator, like the teacher, makes some judgments as to what material he/she should include in a report and how best to frame that information so that the objectives may be reached. My decision was to write an interpretive account presenting meanings which the phenomena under study had for the actors involved rather than literally describing the transactions which occurred. Thus elements of the co-op program would be described from the perspectives of the many groups which were affected by it.

I adopted a format similar to many ways to one used by Simon and Dippo (1980) in their art museum research. This type of account, called dramatic analysis, gives an interpretive description of events and participants' perspectives through a series of story segments. It also includes a base narrative in which staff members and researchers involved in the study are depicted fictionally as reacting to each of the story fragments. This base narrative helps to remind the reader that the account is an interpretive one.

These literary devices were employed in the crafting of my account. Although the information presented in the account was drawn from the case study data, it was written in the form of a narrative or story. This involved using fictional characters, contrived settings (as in the base narrative), and vignettes about peoples' experiences and perspectives. Characters who appear are either based on real

people whose names have been changed to preserve anonymity or they are composite figures. By using composites, I was able to combine information gleaned from several people and present it in a more concise, interesting form. But let me emphasize that the content of such conversation was grounded strongly in data collected in the case study.

In my account, five story segments were developed, describing events and views or the various groups affected by co-op. Following each segment, the base narrative presented a discussion by representatives of the school staff and myself about concerns which emerged from the events described within the segments. By including myself as a subject within the base narrative I was able to present issues which staff members (or readers) might not find problematic at the outset.

Presenting the Account

Continuing in my role of evaluator, I took an active part along with two fellow researchers, in the reaction sessions. The account was used as a starting point for discussion and as reference material during the meeting. Much of the talk went beyond its confines as it often does in the classroom. As facilitator, my task was to direct and control the discussion to some extent. A hierarchy of methods for involving audience members in the discussion had been developed beforehand but was rarely needed as conversation flowed freely.

Results and Conclusions

There was some evicence that participants of both groups had identified with the characters and situations described within the

account. The following comment made by a member of the internal audience exemplifies this feeling of identification:

> I saw myself in it, all through it, even in the sections which weren't about health care. These things are all things that happen to all of us.

Contrast this statement with one made by a member of the external audience:

> I said, "Yeah" that happened. I remember what I did. I remember what the solution was. I've had that experience. Great, we've gone through that. Good, someone else is having the same problem.

Although both of these quotes indicate that the speakers feel a bond with the characters portrayed in the account, there is a qualitative difference between those statements made by the internal versus the external participants. While the internal participants suggested that they could "see themselves" in the account, members of the external audience looked back at their past experiences and remembered what they had done.

One of the most significant differences between the reaction of the two groups toward the account was their time orientation. The internal audience used the account as a starting point for discussion of their present practice and possibly changes in the future. Conversely, the account seems to have stimulated the external participants to look back upon their past experiences and the manner in which they solved their problems. It appeared to give them a sense of accomplishment to see how far they had progressed over time.

This difference may be due to the length of time audience members had been involved with co-op. The internal staff had only two and a half years of experience in the program whereas the external

teachers ranged in experience from one to seven years with most teachers having at least five years involvement. The external group felt that they had encountered and solved most of the issues discussed in the account; therefore their reaction was to diagnose the problem and give their solution. On the other hand, the internal group members were dealing with ongoing issues which still had to be resolved in their own minds.

A second factor which may have caused the different response was that the internal group had been given few opportunities to meet and discuss their problems whereas the external staff was a tightly-knit group which had spent much time discussing issues over the past few years.

While it can be said that a certain amount of reflective dialogue occurred during the internal discussion session, the quality of reflection varied among the examples noted. In some cases, the process was only partially completed. For instance, in some situations participants recognized the weakness of a practice and the need for alternate action but then failed to follow through on what that action might entail or how it might affect the program. In many other situations, they neglected to examine what the underlying purpose of the discussed practice was. This lack of reflection upon purpose occurred even though the account included sections in which the characters themselves discussed the purpose of a specific practice. This is hardly a startling result as many school environments encourage

teachers to focus on what they are doing rather than why.

A second factor which may be related to the quality of reflection is the degree of significance of the practice being discussed. During the internal discussion, much talk centred upon time-tabling issues while the more educationally significant issue of subject matter content was not considered to the same extent.

Members of both audiences felt that the account could be used effectively with other co-op teacher groups. They felt that many of the issues embedded within the account were common to most developing co-op programs. In spite of this positive reaction, participants pointed out a weakness which they felt might mar the usefulness of the account. They felt that it had neglected to describe the "high points" of a co-op program and was therefore not a complete portrayal.

Readers had little difficulty accepting the "fictionalized" nature of the account. This may have been partially due to the foreword included in the account which clearly indicated that it was a "story" based on what people had said and on what the writer had observed within the context of one school. The foreword also contained suggestions for how participants might approach the reading of the account. Preparing readers for what they will encounter in accounts such as this may be essential. This encourages the readers to focus on the issues portrayed and how these issues may relate to their own situation.

Implications for Evaluation

I would like to discuss two areas which I feel have pedagogical

implications for evaluation. First, there are many ways in which educators approach teaching. In some cases the learning process is very directed while in others, more onus is placed on the learners to draw their own conclusions from the information presented to them. In both situations, the educator is present to guide and give advice when needed.

The evaluator plays a similar role in helping audience members to further their understanding of the phenomena under investigation. The evaluator needs to be clear in his/her own mind about what pedagogical approach will be most effective in order to best reach the objectives of a specific evaluation. These strategies can be employed both in structuring the written account and in its presentation.

Although it is evident that the pedagogical approach may vary depending upon the purpose of the evaluation and the audience's learning style, the significant factor is for evaluators to be aware of what approach will be most effective in helping them to reach their goals.

The second aspect I would like to discuss is how important it was for myself as evaluator-educator to participate in the follow-up discussion session. This allowed me to direct the talk to some extent toward the goal of the evaluation. So often, evaluators feel that their task is completed when their report is written. But in many cases there is a great potential for evaluators to more effectively reach their objectives if they accompany their report a few steps further. By doing this, the evaluator can be present to get immediate feedback from the audience. If misunderstandings exist, he/she has the opportunity

to clarify them as well as giving further background information if needed.

Another benefit is derived from participating in discussion sessions. Much can be learned at first hand, about how people react to specific reports and why. This information can then be utilized when writing future reports.

Future Research

In closing, I would like to consider three areas of research for the future which address issues raised by my study. The promotion of reflection was the main educational purpose of the account discussed today. Many other purposes exist for writing evaluation reports. Further work needs to be done on how contextual factors influence audience reaction to different forms of reporting which have been developed for specific purposes.

Second, I have suggested that the pedagogical approach used by evaluators may vary depending upon the purpose of the evaluation. We need to examine the potential effectiveness of matching specific pedagogical approaches to a variety of evaluation purposes.

Last, how does an account such as the one discussed here affect readers in the long term? Do readers move from thinking and talking about their practices to actually changing them? Would follow-up discussions indicate that they have been reflecting upon their practice or purpose over time? The answers to these questions would help to expand our knowledge about the process of reflection.

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